

SEPTEMBER 29, 1976

## ELECTION '76: THE HARROWING GAP

AMICR: PUBLIC OPINION POLLS, TAKEN SHORTLY AFTER LAST WEEK'S TELEVISED DEBATE, SHOW PRESIDENT FORD CONTINUING TO GAIN ON HIS DEMOCRATIC RIVAL JIMMY CARTER. CHARLES MEDD LOOKS AT WHAT THE POLLS ARE SAYING AND AT SOME OF THE REASONS WHY.

VOICE: THE INITIAL JUDGEMENT OF MOST POLITICAL EXPERTS WAS THAT LAST WEEK'S DEBATE ENDED IN A DRAW. BUT THE FAR MORE IMPORTANT JUDGEMENT-- THAT OF AMERICANS WHO PLAN TO VOTE-- GAVE PRESIDENT FORD A SMALL BUT DECISIVE VICTORY. AND THAT REACTION-- ACCORDING TO A SERIES OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS-- WAS JUST ONE OF SEVERAL FACTORS POINTING TO WHAT NOW APPEARS TO BE AN EXTREMELY CLOSE ELECTION CONTEST.

VIRTUALLY ALL MAJOR OPINION SURVEYS CONTINUE TO SHOW JIMMY CARTER AS THE PROBABLE WINNER ON NOVEMBER SECOND. BUT THE COMMANDING LEAD ENJOYED BY THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE JUST A FEW WEEKS AGO IS FAST DIMINISHING. WHILE THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS ALIKE REMAIN LOYAL TO THEIR PARTY CANDIDATES, THE LATEST SURVEYS SHOW A SUDDEN SHIFT AMONG INDEPENDENT VOTERS TOWARD THE PRESIDENT. ACCORDING TO A NEW YORK TIMES POLL, PART OF THAT SHIFT IS A DIRECT RESULT OF HISTER CARTER'S EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY MORE CLOSELY WITH THE TRADITIONAL POSITIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

THE CARTER CAMPAIGN-- MOST OBSERVERS AGREE-- HAS NOT BEEN HELPED BY A SERIES OF RECENT MISTAKES, MANY OF THEM COMMITTED BY THE CANDIDATE HIMSELF. AMONG THEM WERE MISLEADING REMARKS ABOUT TAX REFORM THAT SUGGESTED A TAX INCREASE FOR HALF THE AMERICAN POPULATION AND HIS MUCH-QUOTED INTERVIEW WITH PLAYBOY MAGAZINE ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR THAT SOME FOUND OFFENSIVE.

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF SUCH STATEMENTS IS HARD TO JUDGE. WHAT WORRIES DEMOCRATIC LEADERS IS THE CONTINUING EVIDENCE THAT MANY VOTERS ARE STILL UNCERTAIN ABOUT JIMMY CARTER. ONE RECENT POLL, FOR EXAMPLE, SHOWS VOTERS BY AN ALMOST TWO-TO-ONE MARGIN AGREEING THAT THEY KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT OF PRESIDENT FORD BUT ARE UNSURE OF HIS RIVAL.

JIMMY CARTER'S SUCCESSFUL DRIVE FOR HIS PARTY'S NOMINATION, AND RONALD REAGAN'S NEARLY SUCCESSFUL CHALLENGE FOR THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION, GAVE EVIDENCE THAT AMERICAN VOTERS WERE SEEKING A CHANGE IN WASHINGTON.

BUT WITH LESS THAN FIVE WEEKS TO GO BEFORE ELECTION DAY, THERE IS GROWING EVIDENCE THAT THE VOTERS WANT TO KNOW JUST WHAT THAT CHANGE WILL MEAN.